

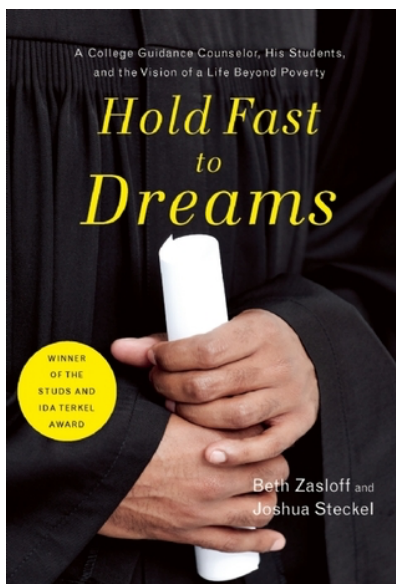
HOLD FAST TO DREAMS:

A COLLEGE GUIDANCE COUNSELOR, HIS STUDENTS, AND THE VISION OF A LIFE BEYOND POVERTY

Beth Zasloff & Joshua Steckel



*“All you kids are going to do is drop out and get pregnant or get hooked on drugs.”
-Eighth Grade Teacher*



“He was just rough housing me for no damn reason, throwing me around. That’s the type of thing a lot of us go through. A lot of teachers at school, a lot of people, don’t understand. It just sucks.”

-Dwight (one of Steckel’s students)

AIMS AND PERSPECTIVES

Zasloff and Steckel demonstrate what it takes to help underprivileged and underrepresented students from a Brooklyn neighbourhood not only get accepted into college, but to be successful and complete a post-secondary education.

Hold Fast to Dreams identifies and explores the need to make post-secondary and the opportunities for high school students in America more accessible to all regardless of their race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Resiliency is a common thread brought through in each one of the ten student’s stories and experiences. All students demonstrate resiliency in overcoming class and ethnic barriers to gain acceptance to colleges.

Zasloff & Steckel bring to light the reality that the “American Dream” and the no child left behind policy is not achievable for all. Steckel had a well paying and comfortable job in the Upper East Side of New York, but made the decision to leave and pursue a more challenging career where he could be of use and pursue his passion.

The book aims to push students and teachers forward in seeing that anything is possible, but in a realistic way, through the transformation of the ten students and the realities they faced, even once they were accepted into college.

The aim of the book is to shed a light on the false reality and belief that the American Dream is only attainable for the elite and that no matter what policies are set in place by the government, there is little follow through. The reader is exposed to various factors that inhibit the decisions and choices of a student who lives in poverty, or below the poverty line (ie. family dynamics, fear of losing their roots, breaking the poverty cycle, financial ties, family commitments, etc.)



Winner of the Studs & Ida Terkel Prize

SUMMARY

Hold Fast to Dreams follows ten of John Steckel's high school students and their trials and stories through pursuing "The American Dream: of college in America. Zasloff & Steckel advocate that there is "unequal access and inadequate support for students below the national average." The married couple turns their focus towards uncovering the many ways the American education system is failing in its promise as a ladder of opportunity.

Zasloff & Steckel are able to see past the challenges of the ten students, and present their stories and experiences to demonstrate intelligence, resilience, and heroism of the young people.

Through the captivating real-life stories, Zasloff & Steckel are able to portray a devastating reality for inner-city Brooklyn high school students and document their journey with hope and inspiration. The authors do not sugar coat the situations, and are quite transparent in the process, as not everything goes the way it should, or as it was meant to.

The follow up with each of the ten students and to see them all the way through their post-secondary and programs is remarkable and offers a glimpse of hope to all teachers, parents and school staff. Although it is a book written with an American perspective and a different system, the challenges are identical for Canadian students, especially minorities.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Beth Zasloff and Joshua Steckel are married and live in Brooklyn with their three kids. Zasloff currently is a teaching artist in the New York City Public Schools. She is the co-author of "Hope, Not Fear: A Path to Jewish Renaissance." with Edgar M. Bronfman. Zasloff received her BA in English from Yale University and MA from the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars.

Joshua Steckel is a college counsellor at the Brooklyn school for collaborative studies. He is member of the New York City Outward Bound Schools Network. He has his MSED in School Counselling from Hunter College and an MA in English from Johns Hopkins University. Steckel has worked as a teacher and counsellor since 2000.

OUTLINE:

Chapter 1: Riding Backward: Nkese and Dwight

Chapter 2: With Whom Do You Make Your Permanent Home?

Chapter 3: Take The Brooklyn Out of You: Nkese and Dwight

Chapter 4: Someone to Step Up and Pave the Way

Chapter 5: Away from the Madness: Mike and Abby

Chapter 6: Do You Know What It's Like to Live My Life? (Kennetta, Angie & Rafael)

Chapter 7: Finding the Best Fit: Ashley

Chapter 8: Forward Movement: Nkese and Dwight

Chapter 9: Room to Grow: Mike and Abby

Chapter 10: Undocumented American Dream: Aicha and Santiago

Chapter 11: Let's Chanhe Lives: Kennetta, Angie and Rafael

Chapter 12: The Will to Aspire: Aicha and Santiago

"I do not want to be part of that stereotype of young black females. I feel I have something to offer to the world. But opportunities for underprivileged kids like me are limited. For me, education is the only chance I have to make it out of poverty." - Nkese (Student of Steckel)

CRITICAL EVALUATION

WHAT WAS STECKEL'S ROLE?

Steckel was along side the students through the entire process. With his experience at the Upper East Side Private school, he was learning about the process and lack of opportunities his new students faced.

Steckel's role was to align his students with pre-qualified programs for disadvantaged students. He helped students meet deadlines, and celebrated their highs and lows.

WHAT STYLE / LEADERSHIP APPROACH BEST DEFINES STECKEL?

Hold Fast to Dreams demonstrates many leadership qualities through Steckel and his role as a school counsellor.

- ✓ Team Leadership: "A team is a type of organizational group that is composed of members who are interdependent, who share common goals, and who must coordinate their activities to achieve their goals." (Northouse, pg. 363). Steckel demonstrates his leadership through leading a team of students, as well as collaborating with his colleagues within his school and college community.
- ✓ Adaptive Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Skills Approach, and even more explicitly, Servant Leadership as Steckel is assisting and advocating for his students and their needs and goals.



"What's my future? He (Dwight) remembered thinking. I'm never going to have a great job, I'm never going to go anywhere. Maybe I'll be like every other black dude in the streets. I might sell drugs; I might get killed." - Dwight

APPLICATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

- ✓ The success stories of the ten students have built foundations for others in applying and facing stereotyping, racism, and bias in the college process.
- ✓ Of the 42 students in his first graduating class, 41 of Steckel's students entered college, qualified for over \$1.8 million in scholarships.
- ✓ For Josh, "the most important skill he has learned has been how to set aside his own assumptions and listen."

References:

- Northouse, P.G. (2016) *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (7th Ed.) SAGE Publications Inc.
- Zasloff B. & Joshua Steckel (2014) *Hold Fast to Dreams: A College Guidance Counsellor, His Students, and the Vision of a Life Beyond Poverty*. The New Press, NY, NY.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ✓ Steckel used his counselling background to reach out to his students and write compelling essays to get them noticed by colleges. Was this a manipulation tactic? Was he taking advantage of vulnerable students to push forward *his* vision or ideals of what was best for them?
- ✓ What skills can be taken from Steckel's practice and pedagogy and

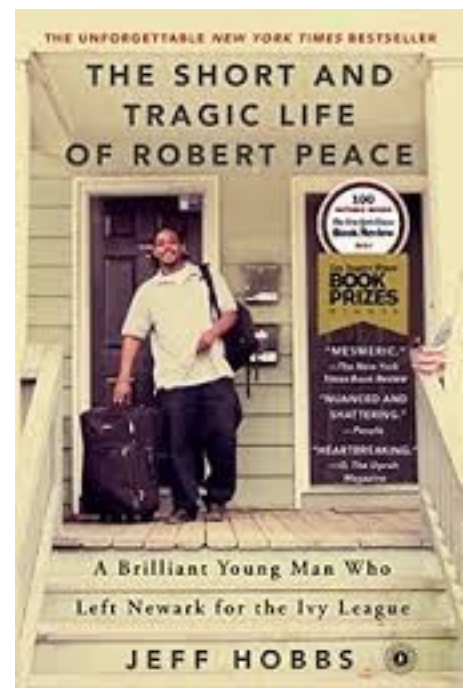
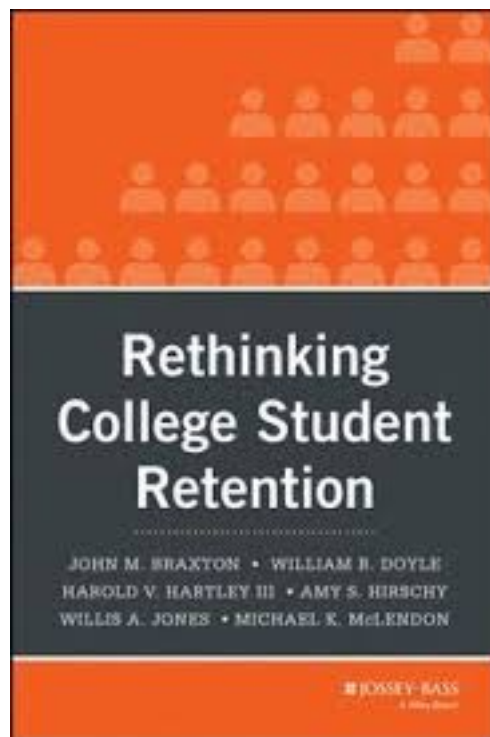
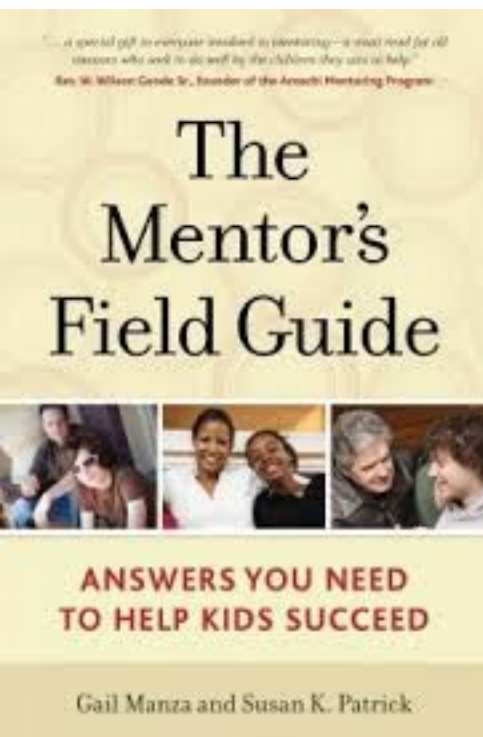
applied to my student's reality in a Northern Community with similar factors and disadvantages?

- ✓ "For the first time, the graduation program listed each senior's post graduation plans." - Zasloff & Steckel
Is this something that will be sustained once Steckel leaves the Brooklyn school? What measures

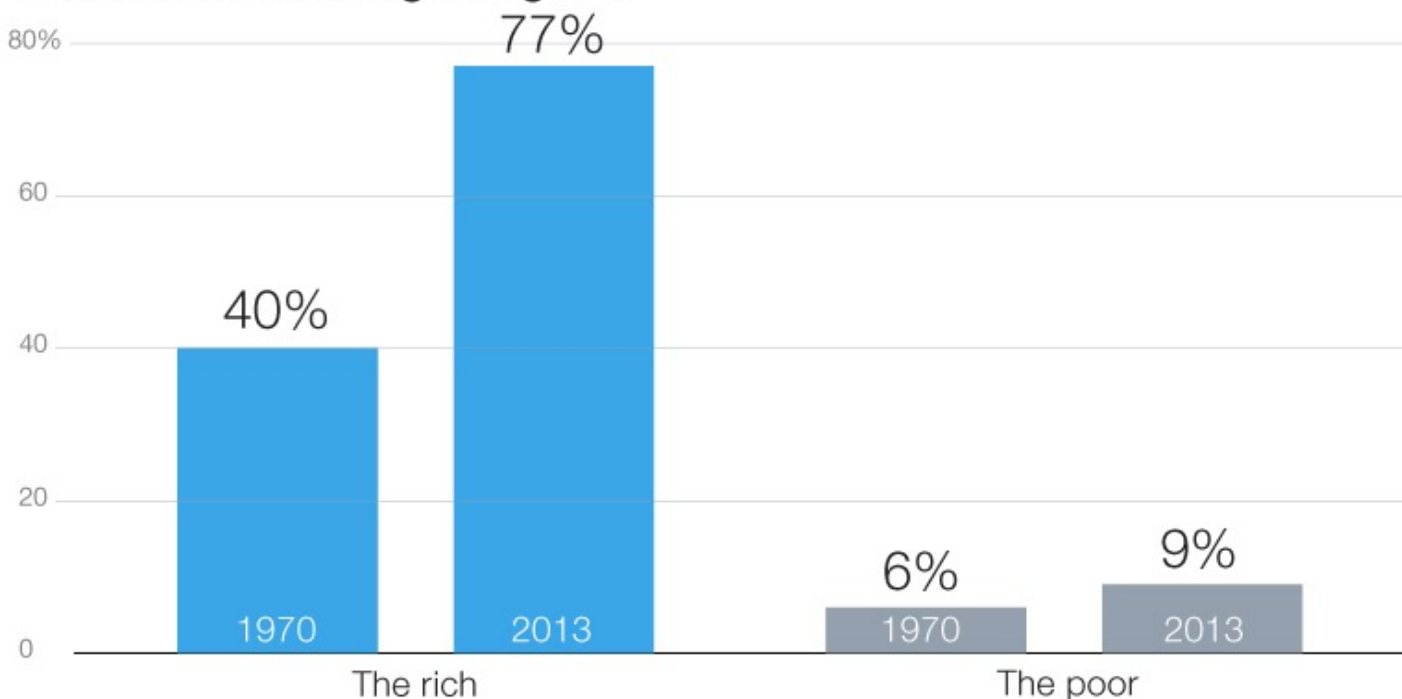
need to be taken to ensure the success of what he has created?

- ✓ Zasloff believes stories of students who make it out are seen as heroic, but Steckel is in awe of the 'element of chance' at work in all their outcomes. What will the structure of society and the education system need to change? Is it public vs private? Rich vs poor?

SUGGESTED READINGS



Who earns a college degree?



*BACHELOR'S DEGREE ATTAINMENT BY AGE 24. GRADUATES ARE DEPENDENT FAMILY MEMBERS.
**FAMILY INCOME IS GREATER THAN \$109,500 FOR THE RICH AND LESS THAN \$24,160 FOR THE POOR.

SOURCE: PENNAHEAD AND THE PELL INSTITUTE